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(1) *BEOWULF'S CHARACTER.*

TO THE EDITORS OF MOD. LANG. NOTES,

SIRS:—John R. Clark Hall, in his prose translation of *Bēowulf* (1901), pp. 189 ff., has presented a sketch of the hero's character, at the close of which he briefly refers to its "darker side." "In some respects," he observes,

"it is evident that his ethical standard was low; for he takes great credit to himself for not having sworn *many* false oaths or murdered his relatives (2738–2740)."

It would be a pity, indeed, if Bēowulf had sworn some false oaths, and it would be surprising, to say the least, if in the face of death he should have derived comfort from the thought that they were only few in number. Dr. Hall's plea that in fulfilling "the sacred duty" of vengeance (*þæt hē his frēond wrece*, 1385) "the custom of the times permitted every sort of treachery" is not particularly convincing as applied to this case; for if the code of honor sanctioned such behavior, there would be no cause for any uneasy feeling about it. But happily for the hero, his reputation has suffered merely through inadequate interpretation: no, Bēowulf was no *wærloga*! When the messenger announced to the Gēats the death of their lord,—*hē ne læg fela wyrda ne worda*, l. 3029, who can doubt that he kept strictly to the truth? In the same way, (*ic ne mē swōr fela āða on unriht* in the mouth of the dying Bēowulf means quite the same as 'I kept all my oaths.' Similarly, *lȳt swigian*, 2897, is='not be silent at all,' 'speak out;' *lȳthwōn lēan*, 203='heartily approve;' *mīte weorode*, *Dream of the Rood* 69, 124='alone'; and when we are told that Unferð—*his mægum nēre ārfæst æt ecga gelācum*, Bēow. 1167, we are to understand that he—[*his*] *brōðrum tō banan wurde*, *hēafodmægum* (587); and possibly some of us will be put in mind of 'The cunning speech of Drumtochty'? There is no need of further exemplifying the use of *Litotes* by the Anglo-Saxon poets.

As to the shortcomings of Bēowulf the hero, there is without question one serious defect—though not a moral blemish—of which his most ardent admirers could not acquit him: he talks too much! But, then, this is a common constitutional fault of the poem.

(2) *CHAUCER'S BOOK OF THE DUCHESSE* 405 ff.

*For hit was on to beholde,*

*As thogh the erthe envye wolde  
To be gayer than the heven,  
To have mo floures, swiche seven  
As in the welken sterres be.*

[Based on ll. 8465 ff. of the Roman de la Rose:

*Qu'il vous fust avis que la terre  
Vosist emprendre estrif et guerre  
Au ciel d'estre miex estelée,  
Tant iert par ses flors revelée.]*

In the Globe Chaucer, H. Frank Heath changes *swiche seven* to *sithes seven*, arguing that the former "makes no sense." This is an emendation at once needless and grammatically impossible. The *as* of the following line clearly warns the critical reader that the correlative *swiche* cannot be dropped without serious syntactical consequences.<sup>1</sup> It is true, Skeat's explanation of the MSS. reading is more confusing than helpful. "To have more flowers than the heaven (has stars, so as even to rival) seven such planets as there are in the sky." But if we just leave the planets out of the interpretation, everything is as smooth as it could be. *Swiche seven* means precisely what it should mean in this context: ['seven such,' that is] 'seven times as (much, or) many.' Cf. Robert of Gloucester, p. 19, l. 8: *For heo hadde suche pritti men as were on þe oper*. (From Mätzner's Grammar iii, p. 232, where other examples are mentioned.) That this idiom is inherited from the Old English period, may be seen from 'Leechdoms' i, 400.17 *selle him twā swylc swylce man æt him nime* (quoted by Toller); cf. *ōðer swylc*, as in Bēowulf 1582 f.: *fȳf tȳne men—ōðer swylc*.

The meaning of ll. 407 f. is thus simply: 'to have more flowers, [even] seven times as many as there are stars in the heaven.'

Regarding the introduction of the numerical element, which may largely be due to the exigencies of the rime (cf. *Canterb. Tales*, G 974: *Though it as greet were as was Ninivee, Rome, Alisaundre, Troye, and othere three*), but at the same time intensifies the comparison, we refer to our monograph *Das Bild bei Chaucer*, pp. 360, 385 f.

FREDERICK KLAEBER.

*University of Minnesota.*

<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, *Troil.* v. 1380:

*Which with your cominge hoom ayein to Troye  
Ye may redresse, and, more a thousand sythe  
Than ever ich hadde, encresen in me joye.*